INTEGRATING CHATGPT AS A CONVERSATIONAL PARTNER IN TEACHING SPEAKING TO EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract. This paper explores the integration of ChatGPT as a conversational partner in teaching speaking to EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students at the university level. The study investigates how artificial intelligence can be used to enhance speaking proficiency, learner autonomy, and confidence in English communication. Data were collected through classroom-based observation and students' feedback during a four-week experiment with ChatGPT-assisted speaking practice. The findings indicate that using ChatGPT as a digital speaking partner provides an interactive, low-anxiety environment that encourages fluency development and critical thinking

Introduction. Developing speaking skills remains one of the most challenging aspects of English language teaching, especially in EFL contexts where authentic interaction with native or proficient speakers is limited. Traditional classroom methods, although effective to some extent, often fail to provide learners with sufficient communicative exposure and real-time feedback. With the rapid development of artificial intelligence, new opportunities have emerged to bridge this gap. Among these innovations, ChatGPT—a conversational AI developed by OpenAI—offers a new dimension for language learning through interactive and human-like dialogue.

The purpose of this study is to explore how ChatGPT can be integrated into speaking lessons to help university EFL students practice real-time communication in English. The study also examines the pedagogical benefits and challenges of using AI-based tools in language instruction.

Literature Review. Recent research in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and AI-enhanced education highlights the growing role of technology in supporting speaking skill development. According to Li (2023), conversational agents provide learners with continuous language exposure and immediate feedback. Similarly, Nguyen and Pham (2022) argue that AI-based dialogue systems create an anxiety-free environment that motivates learners to practice speaking more frequently.

However, as noted by Brown (2021), the success of integrating AI tools in language education depends on the teacher's ability to design meaningful interaction tasks. In other words, ChatGPT should not replace the teacher but rather serve as a supplementary tool that supports communicative goals. The theoretical foundation for this study is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of interaction and scaffolding in language development.

Methodology. This small-scale experimental study was conducted among 20 second-year students at Tashkent State Agrarian University. The participants were English-major students who had intermediate proficiency levels (B1-B2 according to CEFR). The experiment lasted for four weeks and was integrated into their speaking course.

During the sessions, students interacted with ChatGPT on various topics such as environmental issues, cultural traditions, and university life. Each student engaged in a 10–15-minute conversation with ChatGPT twice a week. After each session, they reflected on their experience in a short journal entry. Data were collected through classroom observation, journal analysis, and a post-study questionnaire.

Findings and Discussion. The results of the study revealed several pedagogical benefits. Firstly, students reported a significant increase in speaking confidence. Many participants stated that they felt less anxious when speaking with ChatGPT compared to real classmates or teachers. This aligns with previous studies suggesting that AI tools can reduce affective barriers to communication (Wang, 2022).

Secondly, ChatGPT provided rich lexical input and encouraged students to use new vocabulary in meaningful contexts. The AI's ability to adapt to different topics and maintain natural conversation flow made students more engaged and curious. For instance, students appreciated when ChatGPT asked follow-up questions, corrected minor mistakes, and gave cultural explanations.

Thirdly, the integration of ChatGPT promoted autonomous learning. Several students continued practicing at home beyond classroom requirements. They described ChatGPT as a "patient" and "motivating" partner who allowed them to speak freely without judgment. However, some challenges were also identified: occasional misunderstandings, overuse of formal language by the AI, and limited emotional sensitivity in certain dialogues.

Conclusion. The findings suggest that ChatGPT can be an effective supplementary tool for improving EFL learners' speaking skills, especially when used under teacher supervision. It fosters motivation, fluency, and learner independence. However, its successful implementation requires careful planning, task design, and ethical considerations regarding AI use in education. Future research could focus on long-term effects and comparative studies with other AI tools.

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